

Poland and Germany in the European Union

The Multidimensional Dynamics of Bilateral Relations

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Chapter 11

Determinants of cross-border cooperation in the Polish–German borderland

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Elżbieta Opiłowska

Introduction

Border regions are peripheries. Remote from the national centre, they usually suffer from low population density and a weak economy in comparison to inland areas. However, according to the European regional policy goals and financial instruments of the Interreg programmes, on the one hand, border regions are places where European integration can be tested. Laboratories of integration or microcosms of Europeanness are labels frequently attributed to borderlands (Opiłowska & Roose, 2015). On the other hand, they are places where two nations, two state systems, two languages and cultures are confronted, and they may cooperate or isolate from each other by pointing to the need for identity protection. Thus, they provide fertile ground for populism and far right movements. Nevertheless, border location is often used as a resource for the development of border regions. Cross-border cooperation (CBC) offers the opportunity to overcome economic and social problems, and beyond nation states as well. Moreover, CBC can serve to boost interstate relations.

The German–Polish borderland is a relatively new border region, as it was created after the Second World War as a result of the shifting of the Polish–German border to the west. Thus, the new border communities have not had extensive experience as neighbours (Opiłowska, 2009). Moreover, the historical traumas, language barrier and communist regime have hampered relations in the post-war period. In contrast to western European border regions, where CBC started in the 1950s, for the Polish–German case only the fall of communism launched a new chapter in bilateral cross-border relations, based on the development of joint strategies and common implementation of the European Union's Interreg programmes. From this perspective, the Polish–German CBC exemplifies the transformation processes as characteristic for central and eastern European countries (CEECs). Until 2004 the Polish–German border was the EU's external border. Thus, the removal of border controls under the Schengen Arrangement and the opening of the German labour market to Poles were the last steps towards laying the foundation for good neighbourhood relations. Within this process the EU appears

as an important actor stimulating the CBC. However, until the 1980s CBC remained marginal compared to the policies of the European Community. It was the Council of Europe that supported the development of transborder relations. The Madrid Convention, which the Council of Europe published on 21 May 1980, provided a legal framework for CBC in order to enhance the relationship between territorial communities (Council of Europe, 1980).

The aim of this chapter is to scrutinise the development of the cooperation between Germany and Poland in the borderlands and to identify the enhancing and inhibiting factors of their CBC. Furthermore, it seeks to verify whether the CBC provides evidence for being sustainable and resilient to changes and crises. Hence, the following questions will be addressed. What impact do explanatory categories such as the historical legacy, asymmetry and interdependence have on the development of transborder collaboration? Which other factors determine CBC? What role do EU and state actors play in the establishment and resilience of CBC? Moreover, by applying the concept of *embedded bilateralism* (Krotz & Schild, 2012) to the subnational level, it will be analysed whether the CBC, which provides an example of *parapublic underpinnings*, has proved to be resilient in the analysed time period.

The chapter is based on 24 semi-structured interviews with actors involved in the cross-border cooperation at the subnational (local and regional) and national levels, who represent different fields of cooperation (governance structures, economic departments, cultural and educational institutions as well as NGOs). The interviews were carried out in the period from 2018 to 2019 and have been coded in order to ensure anonymity. Furthermore, official documents such as bilateral agreements, reports, development strategies and secondary studies are analysed in order to identify the determinants of the cross-border cooperation.

The first part of the chapter discusses the various ways borders and the CBC have been researched by highlighting the conceptualisations most relevant to this study. Moreover, it positions the CBC in the framework of *embedded bilateralism*. Subsequently, the impact of the three above-mentioned categories on cross-border cooperation is examined and further factors enhancing or hindering the bilateral relations are specified. Finally, some concluding statements on the resilience of the CBC are made.

Cross-border bilateral relations: conceptual framework

The study of borders is a multidisciplinary field. Historians research how borders have been created and changed over the centuries (Stokłosa, 2012), political scientists focus predominately on demarcation, the management of borders and power relations (Sohn, 2014; Casaglia & Laine, 2016) and sociologists and anthropologists bring to the fore the perception and social construction of borders (Paasi, 1998; Brambilla, 2015). Reflecting the interdisciplinary character of the field, the notions of border and cross-border cooperation are differently conceptualised. However, as Hataley and

Leuprecht (2018: 319) emphasise, there is the consensus across the different fields that ‘borders are human constructs, created to control human behaviour in a spatial context’. As a matter of fact, borders have a dual character: they can function as barriers or bridges, as doors that can be easily opened, but also quickly shut. The opening of borders is not simply a political decision. It is accompanied by the coming together of two nations, particularly the borderland’s residents, whose interactions and cross-border practices may lead to familiarity with the others and the creation of transborder space (Newman, 2003: 20–21). However, even when it is made easier to cross a border, it does not mean that all barriers in transborder contacts are also removed. Other factors, which might occasionally be invisible for state authorities, can hamper CBC.

At the same time, borders have a different significance for different actors. State authorities that focus on territorial integrity assign different meanings to the border from local stakeholders, whose primary goal is economic exchange. Furthermore, border regions reflect complex relationships, encompassing political, economic, social and cultural dimensions ‘that in some instances are a product of the internal state, the external state or a combination thereof [...]’. The study of borderland regions in a temporal context provides a barometer of the changes in relations between states’ (Hataley & Leuprecht, 2018: 319–322). Understood as multidimensional and multifaceted phenomena that are constantly on the move, borders should be examined as dynamic processes. They are created, abolished and recreated through different material and social mechanisms (Hataley & Leuprecht, 2018), which are determined by local, national and supranational actors. Driven by need, interstate conflicts or national interests can lead to either the cessation or the introduction of border controls, securitisation and the surveillance of borders. Thus, ‘borders reflect the historical, political and cultural context in which a state has developed and in which it functions’ (Hataley & Leuprecht, 2018: 320) – and they also reflect the geopolitical situation. Whereas in the Schengen area internal borders have been eliminated, the European Union’s external borders have been strengthened. Accordingly, borders can no longer be perceived just as lines in geographical space or on maps but as complex institutions that govern the extent of in-/exclusion, the degree of permeability and the laws governing trans-boundary movement (Newman, 2003). The decision as to who has (and who does not have) the right to cross the border is made by the power elites of a particular state (top-down perspective), but the bottom-up pressure from communities or local authorities may also determine the process of inclusion and exclusion. Thus, borders are constantly contested, negotiated and imagined in different ways by different actors. They are situated in a dialectical relation – between structure and agency. Whereas structures, created on different scales (European, national, subnational), provide orders, frameworks within borders are governed, controlled and legitimised; agents experience and perform borders according to their interests and motivations (Sohn, 2014).

As highlighted by the foregoing concepts, CBC derives from the motivations and activities of many actors and depends on various factors. But how can it be understood within the approach of embedded bilateralism? Building upon the conceptualisation of embedded bilateralism (Krotz & Schild, 2012) as it was elaborated in the Introduction to this volume, CBC is part of *parapublic underpinnings*. Krotz and Schild (2012: 98) define parapublic underpinnings as a ‘distinct set of cross-border activity that escapes the common binary distinctions of state vs. society or public vs. private. Belonging neither to the public world of governments nor to the private world of transborder societies and economies, it underpins the relations between specific states.’ They include youth and educational exchange, the twinning of cities and regions, bilateral prizes and other publicly funded or organised institutions. Their impact on a state’s foreign relations is not direct, but they create the cross-border environment and help to frame the bilateral issues. According to Krotz and Schild, parapublic underpinnings work for the stability and resilience of bilateral relations despite domestic and international changes and enduring divergences between two countries (2012: 2–3). Hence, by scrutinising bilateral relations at the subnational level, this chapter may provide some arguments for the (non-)identification of German–Polish relations as embedded bilateralism. Although Krotz and Schild (2012) do not explicitly mention border regions as agents of parapublic underpinnings, I would argue that borderlands contribute significantly to strengthening bilateral ties, to producing social meaning in mutual cooperation and serving as a litmus test for bilateral relationship at the national level.

Determinants of cross-border cooperation

Partnerships between border cities and local authorities, bilateral youth institutions, student exchanges, joint prizes and cultural events are examples of non-state activities that occur in borderlands. Furthermore, they are affected by both intergovernmental relations and EU policies. The following section examines the impact of the three categories as identified in the Introduction of the volume on CBC and identifies further factors of explanatory nature.

Historical legacy

The historical legacy, as defined in the Introduction, refers to the impact of history on current relations and actions. It might be related to material remnants (a lack of infrastructure, a dominant economic sector, spatial planning) or social attitudes and practices (daily routines, lack of social trust). With regard to Polish–German CBC, I argue that history has had a remarkable impact on the development of cross-border relations in terms of material deficiencies and social practices. Although this chapter focuses on the post-2004 period, in order to understand current processes occurring in border regions some previous events will be included in the elaboration.

First, it has to be emphasised that the Polish–German border was created as compensation for Poland’s loss of territory in favour of the Soviet Union. In consequence, the Germans were expelled and replaced by displaced Poles from the east. The German expellees very often settled just behind the border, because they hoped to return to their ‘lost homeland’ (Opiłowska, 2009). However, the German hope meant uncertainty for the new Polish settlers and the risk of border revision, leading to mutual suspicion (Opiłowska, 2009). The insufficient sense of stability was increased by the fact that the border remained officially unconfirmed until 1990, which resulted in a lack of investment and renovation work and, finally, in pure negligence of these territories. Moreover, the border was drawn transversely across the existent structural and cultural situation, so that it divided the ethnically and culturally united landscapes. Hence, the societies on both sides of the border had to deal with the historical trauma of their experiences in the Second World War, which have not been appropriately addressed in public discourse. Instead of coming to terms with the past, during the communist period bilateral relations across the border were dominated by the propaganda of peace and socialist friendship. Hence, it can be claimed that after the fall of communism the historical legacy had a negative impact on CBC, which was demonstrated not only in material deficiencies but also in unresolved historical problems as well as prejudices and stereotypes. The many years of neglect in terms of rebuilding the fabric in Polish border regions has not yet been remedied. Furthermore, both the diverse mixture of people who after the Second World War settled in the borderland and the uncertainty of the border have led to weak regional identification of the part of residents. Other problems, such as language and cultural barriers, also result from the lack of common historical experience in the *longue durée* perspective, as is the case with the German–French borderland. Moreover, the enduring presentation of Germany as Poland’s biggest enemy in the public discourse during the communist time caused a sense of fear and lack of social trust among Polish residents. According to a public opinion survey conducted in 1990, 68 per cent of respondents felt threatened by Germany, and 85 per cent believed that, after reunification, Germany would pose an even greater threat to Poland. Only 47 per cent of respondents believed that reconciliation between Poles and Germans would be possible (Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej [CBOS], 1991).

Nevertheless, having remained the obstacle for a long time, the historical legacy in the opinion of my interviewees has also had a positive implication. In the first period after the opening of the border, it served as motivation for the developing of cross-border initiatives:

[I]n the 1990s ... there was an idealistic approach [I]t was about reconciliation, about overcoming the hard border ... the peace border in the GDR, the de facto hard border, which was guarded, not permeable, with bad stereotypes (the red Prussia and the unreliable Poles) – you had to overcome that first, to get to the concrete. There was a lot of

enthusiasm, idealism, to introduce Poland into the EU. There was a discussion: Germany was very much in favour of Poland's accession to the EU; this is forgotten today. That was an important motive.

(D_S_G.12.9.2018)¹

And, in fact, under the umbrella of normative ideas for reconciliation, a wide range of cross-border events, school exchanges, cultural meetings and joint projects were organised. Moreover, it legitimised the cross-border projects until Poland's accession to the EU. Currently, in the opinion of the interviewees, the historical legacy does not play an important role in CBC. The actors focus more on practical goals and the potential benefits from economic cooperation, joint infrastructure or a common brand. However, the experts perceive the lack of historical motivation as dangerous: 'That is also a bit of a danger sometimes; if this moral impetus is missing, then the energy is also missing. The concrete is sometimes not exciting' (D_S_G.12.9.2018).

Most of the interviewees emphasise that the determination to overcome historical prejudices and to integrate the two societies provided an impetus for developing cross-border projects. Although today CBC has become the norm, which, in view of the historical traumas, is very often perceived as *the miracle of normality*, it has also caused a feeling of indifference: 'I think there's that indifference. There are no emotions right now' (P_L_G.4.7.2019).

Against this backdrop, the historical legacy proves to have rather low explanatory power for CBC. My interviewees claim that, although in the 1990s it served as the moral imperative of Polish–German reconciliation and the development of cross-border cooperation, it now scarcely affects bilateral relations in the borderland.

Interdependence

In the case of CBC, indicators of functional (de Wilde, 1991) or social interdependence (Johnson & Johnson, 1989; Putnam, 1995) can be identified. Whereas the former manifests itself *inter alia* through the existence of some bodies with coordinative tasks, the latter occurs when two parties share common goals and their achievement depends on the actions of the other side. Against this background, I would claim that interdependence between the Polish and German borderlands is generated primarily by the European Union, which provides structures and funds for CBC. Thus, in order to get access to EU funds, local-level actors create procedures and institutions to coordinate transnational relations, which, as a result, leads to interdependence.

According to my interview partners, the cross-border collaboration has been rationalised and professionalised, as manifested by created structures that provide a stable and resilient fundament for cooperation. The transborder structures include four Euroregions (Neisse, Spree–Neisse–Bober, Pro Europa Viadrina and Pomerania), which were founded in the 1990s. Although Euroregions operate as associations of Polish and German

local and regional authorities and do not have a legal personality – in contrast to a European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC), which has not yet been established at the Polish–German border – they coordinate cross-border activities by preparing and implementing joint action plans/development strategies and manage the EU small projects funds. An analysis of the Euroregions development strategies² has revealed a high level of interdependence (Holsti, 1978: 517). CBC is perceived as a strategic goal and a chance to ensure the sustainable development of border regions in all areas. The Euroregion authorities strive for enhanced coordination and closer collaboration in dealing with challenges. Seizing the opportunities, Euroregions seek to improve the communication infrastructure, environmental protection and energy management, to maintain and protect the cultural heritage, to develop common health and security services, to cooperate more closely in science and education and to implement transborder tourism marketing. Nonetheless, on the strength of the evaluated documents, it can be argued that the potential of CBC is far from having been fully exploited. Within this perspective, the authorities should strive to manage common objectives on the basis of continuous and close cooperation, in particular by drawing up and agreeing on cross-border strategies, concepts and actions and using cross-border instruments in spatial planning.

Apart from Euroregions, a myriad of other coordinative transborder bodies – regular joint meetings of border city councils, cross-border academic institutions, NGOs, school committees, senior academies, etc. – provide evidence of the Polish–German interdependence in border regions.

Moreover, the social interdependence of both sides of the border can be demonstrated by the conviction of borderland actors that CBC is beneficial for each side. Border regions are peripheries with many structural problems, such as weak economies, an ageing population, emigration by young people and deficiencies in urban infrastructure. Moreover, ecological issues such as air pollution and floods do not stop at the border. Thus, effective CBC can provide some solutions for tackling common challenges. The border location may be regarded as a unique feature of the territories and used in marketing strategies to attract tourists and investments. This uniqueness is emphasised by many local actors as being advantageous: ‘I have always assumed that both Słubice and Frankfurt [Oder] alone would not be interesting. Only this closeness and the fact that we are this twin city makes us noteworthy and ... both parties benefit’ (P1_L_G.20.7.2018).

The same opinion is shared by a German interviewee: ‘Without the border, Frankfurt (Oder) and Słubice would be an insignificant city. This is a recognisable brand – makes the cities interesting from a touristic point of view, if you include both sides’ (D_L_G.5.7.2018).

Through CBC citizens aim to build a shared local identity and to create the sense of belonging together that transcends the border. Drawing on the document analysis as well as interviews, in all cases EU funds are regarded as the main factor encouraging CBC. By applying for the projects carried

out within the European Territorial Cooperation Programme, the Polish and German actors have to rely on each other. However, my interviewees admit that many projects are implemented not because they meet specific needs but because there are funds available, and some associations can maintain their offices and jobs from grants: ‘Programmes, financial resources, had a huge impact to start. Even if there was no other argument, it was money. You will renovate the school if you open classes to two or three students from Poland. It was existential sometimes. [...] What started to be done will be continued, because it was noticed that cooperation brings benefits’ (D_L_Ed.3.7.2018).

Another interviewee adds:

I think that they [EU funds] are a great catalyst for cooperation, because the very fact that they are makes it worth the effort. That cooperation, which would be probably there anyway, but thanks to the funds there is much more of it, and sometimes it flourishes in places you wouldn’t have thought of.

(PL_R_E.18.2.2019)

Hence, the EU provides programme frameworks and financing instruments for bilateral relations between Poland and Germany at the subnational level. The experts also emphasise that using EU funds for the development of cross-border projects has changed the perceptions of the people involved. The CBC became self-evident, a routine, a normality that is continued even if there is no external support:

The participation of the German partner in these events and these international, cross-border components have become rooted in the consciousness, so, if this were not the case now, people would start to wonder – or, at least, they would be surprised.

(Pl_R_G.18.2.2019)

In view of the arguments set out above, functional and social interdependence, which is created by the EU, serve as a substantial enhancing factor for CBC.

Asymmetry

In addition to the historical legacy and interdependence, asymmetry was outlined in the Introduction to this volume as a further category that may impact bilateral relations. It is defined as an imbalance between states and regions in terms of geographic, demographic, economic or political criteria. By comparing various indicators of Germany and Poland at the national level, the countries diverge in population size, GDP per capita, military power and period of EU membership. However, in addition to objective asymmetries reflected in data, they include also ‘semantic constructions and mental

maps in the heads of the people: stereotyped perceptions with emotional and evaluative elements, which are often resistant to counter-examples' (Holly *et al.*, 2003: 819). Asymmetries are always perceived from a certain perspective – e.g. Poles living in the western borderland are poorer compared to the Germans on the other side of the border, but in the context of the whole of Poland they live in quite a rich part of the country. The same applies to the Germans: compared with Poles, they are richer in terms of GDP per capita, but poorer in comparison to the inland (Holly *et al.*, 2003: 820).

The comparison of borderlands causes difficulties because of the ambiguous delimitation of border regions. I therefore decided to compare the Euroregions as institutionalised structures of CBC. Along the Polish–German border four Euroregions had already been established by the 1990s. In order to compare their German and Polish parts, I take four factors into consideration: size of territory, population, unemployment and GDP per capita. However, the required data could be obtained only for the Euroregion Spree–Neisse–Bober. In the case of the other three, some data were missing or not up to date. Therefore, with regard to the unemployment rate or GDP per capita, statistical data for German lands or Polish voivodeships (or subregions close to the border) have been included in the analysis (see Table 11.1).

With regard to the area, the Euroregion Neisse is equally split, whereas for the three remaining Euroregions the Polish territory is larger. The population is also greater in the Polish sections, except in the case of the Euroregion Pro Europa Viadrina, where the German part is inhabited by more residents than the Polish one. GDP per capita is always higher in the German regions; as shown in Table 11.1, in communes forming the German part of Euroregions it is almost three times higher than in its Polish counterpart. This is similarly reflected in the income structure, and results in a high number of Polish employees working in Germany. Comparing the unemployment rate, the average value is similar, or the registered unemployment is slightly higher in German border regions.

Thus, it can be argued that asymmetry in the case of the German–Polish border regions is most visible in the economic sphere. What impact does it have on CBC? Some scholars suggest that asymmetry in economic structures and infrastructure provisions negatively influence CBC, because it leads to diverse interests and approaches favoured in addressing problems. The different levels of hard infrastructure in the two countries result in partnership asymmetry in terms of applying for EU funds. Whereas the Polish stakeholders strive for modernisation and the construction of new technical infrastructure, the German actors focus on innovation projects (Kozak & Zillmer, 2013).

The German–Polish CBC was also impacted by the asymmetrical duration of EU membership. The German side of the borderland, which belonged to the GDR, automatically became part of the EU after the reunification of Germany in 1990. However, the Polish side had to change its governance structures (through the introduction of the self-government reforms in 1990 and 1998) and to undergo a transformation process. As in the case

Table 11.1 Comparison of Euroregions on the German–Polish border

| | <i>Euroregion Neisse (2017)</i> ⁷ | | <i>Euroregion Spree–Neisse–Bober (2019)</i> ⁸ | | <i>Euroregion Pro Europa Viadrina (2014)</i> ⁹ | | <i>Euroregion Pomerania (2007)</i> ¹⁰ | |
|---------------------------------|---|--------------------------------------|--|--------|---|---|--|---|
| | Polish | German | Polish | German | Polish | German | Polish | German |
| Area (in km²) | 4,737 | 4,507 | 8,110 | 1,812 | 5,700 | 4,500 | 20,616 | 15,424 |
| Population (thousands) | 525 | 559 | 589 | 215 | 387 | 432 | 1,610 | 1,029 |
| Unemployment (%) | 3.6–13 | 6.2–9.2 | 6.9 | 7.55 | 5.2 (Lubuskie, Feb. 2020) ¹¹ | 5.1–7.5 (Brandenburg, 2019) ¹² | 7.2 (West Pomerania, Feb. 2020) ¹³ | 7.8 (Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, 2018) ¹⁴ |
| GDP per capita (euros) | 9,050 (subregion Jelenia Góra, 2014–16) ¹⁵ | 31,008 (Sachsen, 2018) ¹⁶ | 10,250 | 28,899 | 10,789 (Lubuskie, 2018) ¹⁷ | 29,411 (Brandenburg, 2018) ¹⁸ | 10,890 (West Pomerania, 2018) ¹⁹ | 27,600 (Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, 2018) ²⁰ |

Source: Own compilation on the basis of statistical data (see endnotes).

of other CEECs, the eagerness to accede placed Poland in a relationship of ‘asymmetrical interdependence’, which offered EU actors opportunities to influence the CEECs (Scherpereel, 2010). According to my interview partners, this hierarchical relationship and the clear division into policy takers and supervisors impacted the CBC up to 2004. Whereas the Polish actors perceived their German counterparts as ‘clever-clever’ and arrogant, the Germans interpreted the spontaneity of their neighbours as disorganisation. However, since Poland’s accession to the EU relations have been based on partnership: ‘There is no more such a pseudo-servant relationship, ... that we are also – I don’t know – inferior, weaker, no. We are equal partners in the discussion’ (Pl_L_G.20.7.2018).

An additional factor of asymmetry that was addressed in the interviews as one that still significantly hinders CBC is the existence of different institutional systems. In Germany, as a federal state, many decisions could be taken at the regional (*Land*) level, whereas Polish borderland authorities are dependent on the central decision-making procedure. These administrative barriers have limited the depth of cooperation with regard to, for example, emergency services, transport and education (learning the neighbour’s language).

Furthermore, although asymmetry is interpreted by many experts and scholars as a hindering factor, in the case of CBC it may also function as a driving force. Local actors see in the developing of CBC the possibility of overcoming the shortcomings on their side of the border. Hence, as Sohn (2014: 590–591) argues, taking into account that strong asymmetry and divergences in cross-border flows cause political and social tensions between local authorities and communities, what matters is the motivation of actors to cooperate, their shared interests and common vision of the development of their region: ‘Yeah, definitely that. Let’s try the opportunities that are offered on the other side. Germany has a high level of competence in research and development and we do not even know if there is such a demand in Poland’ (D_R_E.4.7.2018).

Motivated by shared interests and common vision, border cities such as Frankfurt (Oder) and Słubice elaborated a common development strategy, and in 2011 established a joint office of the two municipalities, the Frankfurt–Słubice Cooperation Center.³

However, CBC does not have to result in integration or convergence. On the contrary, the transborder activities are performed because of disparities such as price and salary differences or distinct cultural and leisure facilities, which demonstrate the practices of commuting, shopping or using services on the other side of the border. Moreover, it is noteworthy that the integration process does not run in a synchronic way. The strong economic cooperation can be accompanied by cultural and social divergences and a lack of cross-border governance structures (cf. Sohn, 2014).

Against this background, it can be argued that asymmetry has an ambivalent impact on German–Polish CBC. On the one hand, before Poland joined the EU, the perceived asymmetry between self-image and the image of the others as not being based on partnership has hindered CBC and communication.

However, according to my interview partners this is no longer the case. On the other hand, asymmetry in prices and the range of products and services motivates people to cross the border. The German and Polish border regions complement each other through their disparities.

Summing up, among the three categories analysed above, interdependence acts as the principal driving force for CBC. Furthermore, examination of the expert interviews and secondary literature revealed another two factors that determine the level of CBC: intergovernmental relations and local leadership. I will elaborate on these in the next section.

The role of state actors

CBC is often considered by politicians from the national level as evidence of good neighbourly relations between Poland and Germany. Even though the border region problems are not among the priorities of high politics, as my interview partners claim, border regions are often used as the location for political meetings and symbolic gestures. Furthermore, it should be mentioned that CBC is rooted in some joint Polish–German state structures. Under the Treaty of Good Neighbourship and Friendly Cooperation, signed in 1991, the Polish–German Intergovernmental Commission for Regional and Cross-Border Cooperation was set up (article 12 of the treaty).

Within the Commission, four committees operate: on CBC, interregional cooperation, spatial planning and education. Moreover, Germany established in 2004 the office of coordinator of German–Polish intersocietal and cross-border cooperation, whose role is to strengthen good neighbourly relations and promote cross-border civil society activities, youth exchanges, partnerships between municipalities and regions, and CBC.⁴ The Polish government established a similar office only in 2014 and defined its tasks as the ‘coordination and development of Polish–German cooperation in the border region, identification and management of challenges arising in the border area, as well as submission of proposals for the development of Polish and German border regions’.⁵ However, my interviews show that both the Intergovernmental Commission and the coordinator’s office are assessed by local actors in CBC more as political symbols of good neighbourly relations than as real agents in the integration process of border regions. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that symbolic acts and practices, as Krotz and Schild (2012: 97) argue, play an important role in the bilateral relations.

As a matter of fact, borderlands are often scenes of symbolic events and commemoration practices. This is where German and Polish politicians frequently meet to demonstrate breaking points in mutual relations. For example, on the night of 30 April to 1 May 2004, on the bridge between Słubice and Frankfurt (Oder), the foreign ministers at that time, Włodzimierz Cimoszewicz and Joschka Fischer, met to jointly celebrate Poland’s accession to the EU. Furthermore, my German interview partner from the national level emphasised the role of CBC as a bonding agent that holds Germany

and Poland together, especially since 2015, when there have been at the national level various tensions between the authorities from the two countries regarding migration, deepening EU integration and the rule of law: ‘You are in the same boat in the border region. And they say you’re abandoned by the capital. No fundamental disagreements. [...] The [border] region has reached a certain degree of interdependence that is irreversible’ (D_S_G.12.9.2018).

However, the work of the Commission, which meets once a year, is perceived by the experts from the subnational level as a façade. Since the change of government in Poland in 2015, this body operates even more ineffectively:

[T]he label does nothing by itself. It depends on the people and on what they want to do and which competences they have. [...] Unfortunately (I can say it in the past tense), it was a very dynamic and very fertile time. However, at the moment there is an absolute slowdown [S]ince the change of government in Poland, the attitude has also changed.

(PL_R_G.8.2.19)

In view of the cooling in Polish–German interstate relations since the domestic political change in Poland in 2015, my interview partners claim that it does not have a direct impact on CBC, but that the atmosphere of the cooperation has changed: ‘Starting from the climate, certain things have changed. It’s not the same routine anymore. In economic cooperation Polish companies are favoured ... We don’t close the door now, but we are waiting ... and will see’ (D_R_E.4.7.2018).

Another expert emphasises the missed support from the state actors:

Very often I get the impression that things are happening here that those sitting in Warsaw have no idea about. So, the legal system does not keep up with what is happening here, and it happens often that someone comes and we are not even able to find a particular regulation or article to say ‘Please, do that’.

(PI_L_G.20.7.2018)

Moreover, by taking into consideration the recent decision on the closure of the Polish–German border due to Covid-19, the discrepancy between the interests of national and subnational actors becomes apparent, as evidenced by numerous appeals by local and regional actors to central authorities. The chairman of the board of the Federation of Euroregions of Poland and at the same time the president of the Spree–Neisse–Bober Euroregion, Czesław Fiedorowicz, called on the Polish prime minister, Mateusz Morawiecki, to lift the prohibition on crossing the border for inhabitants of Euroregions:

Along with the gradual reduction of restrictions on the movement of citizens, I ask the prime minister to allow to cross the border for professional, educational and health reasons, as well as because of the closest

family contacts. [...] We live in a strong symbiosis and need each other. Guben for Gubin, Löcknitz for Szczecin, Zgorzelec and Görlitz, Cieszyn and Český Tešín, Nowy Targ and Kežmarok, Suwalki and Marijampole are supposed to be ‘abroad’, but relations between people, their place of work, residence, family ties, school and university education, treatment, health care and daily contacts are often very intense.

Gazeta Wyborcza (2020)

Similar voices could be heard from other borderland actors. In the northern part of the Polish–German borderland the director of the Asklepios Clinic in Schwedt and the dean of the Pomerania Medical University in Szczecin wrote an open letter to the German chancellor, Angela Merkel, and Polish president, Andrzej Duda, to express their deep concern about the further development of bilateral relations: ‘Then political decisions in Berlin and Warsaw will tear up what has brought the citizens of our region together for decades. It is painful to see these achievements now being put at risk’ (MOZ, 2020).

Krzysztof Wojciechowski, director of Collegium Polonicum, the cross-border academic institution in Słubice, said in a radio programme: ‘Many borderland residents feel as if they have been split up, as if their lungs are in one room and their stomach and kidneys in another.’⁶

In sum, borderlanders complained about the border closure and lack of understanding from the side of state authorities. Dietmar Woidke, the coordinator of German–Polish cooperation, adds: ‘There is no longer the hotline between Potsdam and Warsaw since the former Polish coordinator for Polish–German Cross-border and Regional Cooperation was given a different job in December [2019] and no successor was appointed. Regarding the closure of the Polish border for foreigners ... we can do nothing but ask the neighbouring country for goodwill’ (Schröder, 2020).

This example demonstrates how integrated and resilient the Polish–German borderland is. Despite the crisis caused by the pandemic, the authorities and the inhabitants of the borderland alike want to continue to cooperate and even to support each other in this difficult situation. However, they cannot find appropriate support and understanding from the Polish national authorities.

Local leadership

In scrutinising the categories affecting cross-border engagement in building communities and participating in local actions, Hataley and Mason (2018) refer to the collective efficacy theory as developed by Sampson (2004). Among other factors influencing CBC, the authors bring to the fore the leadership of individuals or organisations as a crucial variable. Leadership might be characterised by agents’ capacity to organise and mobilise local community members to engage in civic actions, to work towards a common goal, to realise great visions and ideas. Thus, by pointing to determinants of CBC, my

interviewees put into the foreground intercultural/transnational competence as an essential, desired characteristic of leaders in border regions.

In order to shed light on this issue, I rely on the concept of transnational competence as elaborated by Koehn and Rosenau (2002). They argue that, in the global world of increased interactions across national borders, transnational competence is an important tool to cope with the challenges of interdependence. Within this perspective, four sets of skills can be distinguished: analytic, emotional, creative/imaginative and behavioural. The first dimension refers to the understanding of the central beliefs, values and practices of the counterpart culture and society and to establishing a reciprocal link between one's own and the counterpart conditions. Next, emotional competence involves a general openness towards other/foreign cultures, intercultural empathy and cooperation ability. Creative/imaginative competence in turn implies the ability to foresee diverse cultural perspectives and mutually acceptable alternatives. Finally, behavioural competence includes communicative and functional agility. Whereas the former comprises language skills, knowledge of the non-verbal codes of the counterpart culture and the ability to avoid communication misunderstandings, the latter draws on the capacity to develop and maintain interpersonal relationships, to employ organisational strategies and to overcome conflicts (Koehn & Rosenau, 2002: 110). By applying the concept of intercultural/transnational competence to the borderland situation, it can be argued that living on the border provides the best opportunities to acquire these skills through everyday contact with other cultures, languages, values, ways of life, etc.

Starting from the foregoing assumption and based on the statements of my interview partners, language competence, openness and knowledge of the neighbour's working culture are highlighted as crucial elements of successful CBC:

They [CBC actors] should be very open to the other side, flexible, open to unpredictable situations. Even if they don't know the language, encounter legal problems, they don't get discouraged; they just look for a solution. These are the competences that ensure success. Intercultural competences, language skills are important, but flexibility in action and thinking is also important.

(D_L_Ed.3.7.2018)

Consequently, the intercultural competence of subnational authorities and other agents of CBC contribute to the development of social ties and social capital (Putman, 1993) across territorial borders. Nevertheless, transnational competence as well as social capital require durability. And it is precisely the lack of durability in terms of employment in managing positions in Polish local government and economic institutions that the German actors of CBC complain about. The frequent changes of leaders and officials on the Polish

side, which is not the case in Germany, hinder effective collaboration. Thus, the partners from both sides of the border have to start from the beginning, get to know each other, establish ties and personal contact, which in turn takes time and slows down the cooperation (cf. D_L_G.4.7.2018).

Conclusions

2020 marks the 30th anniversary of the signing of the border treaty between Germany and Poland that laid the foundation for the development of bilateral relations. For border region authorities, as well as communities, the treaty meant the end of fear and uncertainty and a new era in the development of cross-border interactions. Borderlands became a testbed for bilateral relations at the national level and for the European integration process. In order to get access to EU programmes and funds they very quickly created institutional structures, such as Euroregions and twin cities.

This chapter aimed to verify whether CBC provides evidence for being sustainable and resilient to changes and crises, such as changes in intergovernmental relations between Poland and Germany or the temporary closing of the border. Moreover, the impact of three explanatory categories – the historical legacy, interdependence and asymmetry – on cross-border cooperation has been explored and further determinants, such as intergovernmental relations and local leadership, indicated. On the strengths of the expert interviews evaluated above, as well as documents and relevant literature, I would argue that bilateral relations at the subnational level may be considered as stable, rooted in EU programmes and institutionalised cross-border structures such as Euroregions and twin cities, and resilient to changes and contestations at the national level and to crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic.

Nevertheless, because of the weak competences of subnational authorities, in particular on the Polish side, the decisions taken by state actors, such as staff exchange at the management level or the closing of the border because of the epidemic, handicap or at least slow down cross-border cooperation. It is worth noting that CBC is not sufficiently embedded into structures at the national or European level. The state-appointed representatives for CBC and the Intergovernmental Commission play more of a symbolic role than functioning as a real agency.

With regard to the determinants of CBC, all three elaborated categories were found to be significant in explaining the resilience of the borderland. Asymmetry and the historical legacy operate as both motivating and hindering factors for cross-border cooperation. Against this backdrop, interdependence – which in borderlands is mostly created by EU programmes and funds – may be considered the strongest top-down booster of cross-border initiatives. German and Polish actors alike perceive CBC as a resource that is beneficial for both sides. In addition, many cross-border projects and investments could not have been implemented without EU funds, which are allocated to joint Polish–German stakeholders. The quotation from one of

the interviews, ‘We are all in the same boat’, clearly illustrates the perspective of border region actors. Having said that, I contend that the durability, sustainability and resilience of bilateral relations at the subnational level depend largely on less tangible factors, such as the motivation and intercultural competence of local leaders, who may fuel or hinder the cooperation. Moreover, decisions taken at the state level can hamper CBC, as the temporary closing of the border demonstrated. Although state actors attribute an important role to CBC in public discourse, they do not sufficiently support the local actors in their cross-border actions.

Summing up, Poles and Germans at the subnational level stick together despite national differences, domestic political change and the pandemic crisis. A bilateral bond is provided by joint dependence on EU funds, institutional structures and the recognition of the mutual benefits of the bilateral relationships.

Notes

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- 1 All interviews were coded in the following way: first letter: P/D – expert from Poland/Germany; second letter: S/R/L – level of cooperation (state, regional, local); third letter: G/E/C/Ed/CS – field of cooperation (governmental body, economic, cultural, educational or civil society institution); date of interview.
- 2 I evaluated the newest available development strategies of the Euroregions as the following: ‘Strategische Handlungsempfehlung der Euroregion Neisse–Nisa–Nysa 2014–2020’; ‘Wizja 2030: plan działania i rozwoju Euroregionu Sprewa–Nysa–Bóbr na lata 2021–2027’; ‘Koncepcja rozwoju i działania Euroregionu Pro Europa Viadrina 2014’; ‘Transgraniczna koncepcja rozwoju i działania Euroregionu Pomerania na lata 2014–2020’.
- 3 See www.frankfurt-oder.de/Bürger/Verwaltung-Politik/Frankfurt-Slubicer-Kooperationszentrum/index.php?La=1&NavID=2616.1784&object=tx,2616.8785.1&kat=&kuo=2&sub=0.
- 4 See www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/aamt/koordinatoren/d-pol-koordinator-node.
- 5 See www.gov.pl/web/mswia/rady-i-komisje-miedzyrzadowe-ds-wspolpracy-transgranicznej-i-miedzyregionalnej.
- 6 See www1.wdr.de/radio/cosmo/programm/sendungen/radio-po-polsku/standpunktwidzenia/krzysztof-wojciechowski-pogranicze-koronawirus-100.html.
- 7 See <https://wroclaw.stat.gov.pl/publikacje-i-foldery/inne-opracowania/euroregion-nysa-2018-wybrane-informacje-statystyczne,4,20.html>.
- 8 ‘Wizja 2030: plan działania i rozwoju Euroregionu Sprewa–Nysa–Bóbr na lata 2021–2027’, January 2020.
- 9 See www.euroregion-viadrina.pl/files/koncepcjarozwojuidealizacjaev-viadrina-2014.pdf.
- 10 See <https://wroclaw.stat.gov.pl/publikacje-i-foldery/inne-opracowania/euroregiony-na-granicach-polski-2007,8,1.html>.
- 11 See <https://stat.gov.pl/obszary-tematyczne/rynek-pracy/bezrobocie-rejestrowane/bezrobotni-zarejestrowani-i-stopa-bezrobocia-stan-w-koncu-lutego-2020-r-,2,91.html>.

- 12 See www.moz.de/landkreise/oder-spree/beeskow/artikel2/dg/0/1/1775921.
- 13 See <https://stat.gov.pl/obszary-tematyczne/rynek-pracy/bezrobocie-rejestrowane/bezrobotni-zarejestrowani-i-stopa-bezrobocia-stan-w-koncu-lutego-2020-r-,2,91.html>.
- 14 See www.destatis.de/DE/Themen/Querschnitt/Jahrbuch/jb-arbeitsmarkt.html.
- 15 See <https://stat.gov.pl/sygnalne/komunikaty-i-obwieszczenia/lista-komunikatow-i-obwieszczen/obwieszczenie-w-sprawie-szacunkow-wartosci-produktu-krajowego-brutto-na-jednego-mieszkanca-w-latach-2014-2016,281,5.html>.
- 16 See <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/73061/umfrage/bundeslaender-im-vergleich---bruttoinlandsprodukt>.
- 17 See <https://stat.gov.pl/obszary-tematyczne/rachunki-narodowe/rachunki-regionalne/wstepne-szacunki-produktu-krajowego-brutto-w-przekroju-regionow-w-2018-roku,8,2.html>.
- 18 See <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/73061/umfrage/bundeslaender-im-vergleich---bruttoinlandsprodukt>.
- 19 See <https://stat.gov.pl/obszary-tematyczne/rachunki-narodowe/rachunki-regionalne/wstepne-szacunki-produktu-krajowego-brutto-w-przekroju-regionow-w-2018-roku,8,2.html>.
- 20 See www.destatis.de/Europa/DE/Thema/Allgemeines-Regionales/regionalesBIP_tabelle.html.

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